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I am a person with a significant disability who believes in the independent living philosophy and disability rights movement. Persons with disabilities in our society are excluded and discriminated against largely by constructs – barriers in architecture, technology, and other structures. I have worked in the independent living movement for sixteen years and am currently the head of the State Independent Living Council – Governor appointees designated to monitor and improve independent living services within the state. I have friends, colleagues, and currently, Council members, who have disabilities that affect their ability to speak. While I find that with patience and empathy, most of them can be understood, I also believe that as a society we have a responsibility to provide every opportunity for them to participate fully and to communicate with the means most effective for them.

As regulators of some of the technologies that help people with speech related disabilities maintain their independence, I'd like to ask you to consider some improvements to the system to make it more functional. As I said above, I believe that most people with speech related disabilities can be understood with patience and empathy. I think operators serving them via telephone or computer should be allowed – required – to spend the time necessary to understand the person. Despite the Patriot Act, most of us enjoy privacy in our telephone and computer communications and the same benefits should be extended and emphasized for persons with speech related disabilities. Just like other phone services have short numbers to make them easy to use, speech to speech should have some universal ease of use number or system too. There should be publicity and training regarding speech to speech relay services so that users and operators are familiar with the system and comfortable with it.

Thank you for your time.